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Arafat Courting Syrian Chief to Regain Power

Yasser Arafat, the wily Palestinian leader, has more lives than a cat. Last year, he was lucky to escape from Lebanon one jump ahead of a Syrian-supported assault force that was gunning for him.

Now he is maneuvering to regain the leadership of the Palestine Liberation Organization, with the support of none other than the Syrians.

Arafat not only is trying to ingratiate himself with his mortal enemy, Syrian President Hafez Assad, but he may get away with it.

He has the backing of Syria's bankroller, Saudi Arabia, and arms supplier, the Soviet Union.

Arafat was defeated and discredited when he escaped from Syrian clutches in Lebanon. He spent the next several months wandering in the political wilderness, seeking refuge in one Arab country after another.

During the Israeli bombardment of Beirut two years ago, I spent a couple of hours with Arafat in his bunker. Face to face, he was impressive, even magnetic. But there was a tenseness about him, a wariness of

eye, a sense of being beleaguered. The Israelis backed him into a corner, and he negotiated his way out. The Syrians backed him into a corner, and again he got out.

Assad tried to replace him with Abu Musah as PLO chieftain. Intelligence sources tell me Assad still detests Arafat personally and distrusts him politically.

Yet a reconciliation is possible, even probable.

For despite his repeated humiliations, Arafat still retains the loyalty of the Palestinian masses. The same cannot be said for Musah. So in the cause of Palestinian unity, Arafat has sought to make up with Assad.

Arafat has enlisted the intercession of the Soviet Union, Saudi Arabia and Egypt. So far, Assad has withstood the pressure. But a reconciliation, based on the hard realities of Arab politics if not mutual trust, might be worked out.

For his part, Arafat is reported ready to kowtow to Assad in return for a gesture of Syrian support, such as a public reception in Damascus as an acknowledged Palestinian leader. Intelligence analysts emphasize that any deal would have to be on Syrian terms. Assad would insist on retaining ultimate control over Arafat, or at least veto power over his military and diplomatic moves.

As one intelligence analyst

summed it up succinctly for my associate Lucette Lagnado, Arafat would have to become Assad's "puppy dog." But Arafat is capable of doing whatever is necessary to assure his survival, and Assad appreciates the clout Arafat still has with the Palestinian people and international leaders.